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Iowa State Receives \$200,000 Grant to Develop Biomass Crops in Southern Iowa

By Emily Heaton, Department of Agronomy

Iowa State University has been awarded a \$200,000 grant to develop perennial cash crops for southern Iowa. The grant was awarded by the U.S. Department of Energy's Sun Grant Initiative to fund biomass crop production research and forms a partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service and Agricultural Research Service.

The funds will be used for research and demonstration at Iowa State, Southwestern Community College and for on-farm research. Perennial warm-season grasses may be a much more appropriate crop for farmers in the southern part of the state. Because the soils there are more erodible and less productive for corn, perennials have the potential to be an economical alternative.

Iowa State research will focus on developing establishment practices for Miscanthus, a new biomass crop in Iowa. In addition to replicating some ISU research, faculty and students at Southwestern Community College will compare Miscanthus in field plots alongside native perennial grasses. Improved production of biomass crops is of interest in the area because farmers in northern Missouri and southern Iowa are already producing biomass from grasses for a Missouri cooperative. The harvested biomass is processed into clean-burning pellets that are mixed with coal for electric companies. Biomass production is a response to Missouri's carbon mandates, which limit emissions from coal-fired power plants.

Mark DePoy, Natural Resource and Conservation Service regional coordinator for the Southern Iowa Research Conservation and Development district, thinks the cooperative model would be a good fit for southern Iowa and profitable, because this part of the state is similar in natural resources and soils to northern Missouri. Acreage dedicated to grass crops would produce cleaner water, improve soil quality and provide ample habitat for wildlife while creating good paying jobs.

The federal government also offers incentives through the Biomass Crop Assistance Program. The program matches each dollar up to \$45 a ton that farmers spend to deliver biomass crops for the first two years. The goal of the Iowa State grant project is to create viable systems that protect the land and create a profitable crop for farmers. By helping the farmers make money and protect the soil, we are doing our job.

Emily Heaton is an Iowa State University agronomy professor with extension responsibilities in biomass production. She can be contacted by emailing ehendon@iastate.edu or calling 515-294-1310.

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